



***Temporary Services  
2004***

# ***Downtime at the Experimental Station***



***A conversation with  
Dan Peterman***

***by Dan S. Wang***



The walls that remained intact after the fire that destroyed the Building at 6100 S. Blackstone in the Spring of 2001.



Dan Peterman's studio after the fire.

# ***Downtime at the Experimental Station***

At the corner of 61st and Blackstone, in the South Side neighborhood of Woodlawn, sits a trapezoidal brick structure known to many simply as “the Building.” The artist Dan Peterman acquired it in 1996 from the Resource Center, a local recycling concern whose philosopher-founder, Ken Dunn, has long tested ideas about interconnected economies and ecologies. The Resource Center had operated out of the Building since the late 1960s. Before that it was occupied by a small company called Flood Engineering. Now, nearly eighteen months after a catastrophic fire in the spring of 2001, it sits empty and roofless, waiting to be rehabbed and reoccupied.

At the time of the fire the interior was a honeycomb of oddly angled spaces, subdivided rooms of differing shape and ceiling height, and big garage-like inside/outside areas. The Building housed Peterman’s workspace, the offices of the cultural criticism journal *The Baffler*, Wong Lee’s auto repair, Big Fish Furniture, and Blackstone Bicycle Works. Other spaces were used for staging temporary projects and exhibitions, storing surplus material of all kinds, and hosting group gatherings.

I first stumbled upon the Building not long after Peterman took ownership. I remember it being a junk-hippie kind of place with an outward appearance that could pass for a sleepy corner of Eugene, Oregon, or Burlington, Vermont. The ramshackle structure, the three rusty VW microbuses parked along the curb, and the overflowing community gardens adjacent to the Building made for such a vibe. But instead of fresh country air, you got the mixed scents of the city. Instead of folk dancing, you had the neighborhood kids freestyling as they walked by. And instead of hissy Dead tapes laying around, you had *The Baffler*’s Tom Frank riffing on the Deadhead imprint on the ideology of the New Economy. I liked the symbolism: various small-scale enterprises gathered under one roof, each of which in its own way updated, critiqued, and advanced the validity of projects rooted in earlier countercultural activity. And doing it there, in the shadows of the University and on the edge of the impoverished Woodlawn neighborhood, as if to say that no progressive cultural project would succeed without everyone, no matter their race or class, getting a chance to take part.

Repairing the Building should have been a pretty straightforward process. After all, Peterman owns it and the lot it sits on. But several factors





Almost all back issues of The Baffler were lost in the fire.

complicated the process immensely. A couple years before the fire, the Chicago Public Schools had tried to take the property by eminent domain to expand Carnegie Elementary School next door. After intense negotiations, Peterman struck a deal with the school board in 2000, resulting in a net loss of twenty percent of his land. Although Peterman was able to keep the Building, the negotiations hinted at the gulf separating community members who recognized the intrinsic value of the Building and those who only saw it as an obstacle to conventional real estate development. That disconnect was bound to reassert itself, as real estate speculation finally reached the northern end of Woodlawn after decades of economic neglect. For Peterman and the group of people involved with the Building, the fire was catastrophic. For developers and those City agencies representing their interests, it was the signal to move in and settle this untamed plot, and maybe even get a good bargain out of it.

Immediately following the fire, Peterman and his Building cohorts organized an emergency campaign to board up and fence off the Building. Peterman quickly hired structural engineers and architects and lawyers to save the Building and its contents from demolition. They even organized round-the-clock guard duty by volunteers. In order to derail the forces of “fast-track” demolition, Peterman used all resources available, even leveraging his accumulated prestige as an internationally acclaimed artist. Along with visible local support and quick legal action, letters of backing from around the global world of contemporary art helped to preserve the damaged Building from the wrecking ball.

The structure, though devastated and eventually gutted on the interior, still stands in the form of its outer brick walls. They survived the fire solidly, and in fact became the basis for the legal victory that now allows for the rehabbing to proceed. The Building had been grandfathered as a non-conforming structure on a lot that was re-zoned as residential. That is, the Building would maintain its status as a commercial and light industrial site despite the new zoning, but only under one condition: Its original walls must maintain their integrity. If the walls came down, or were deemed unfit for rehabbing, a new non-residential structure could not be built on the site.

Even after the Building’s occupants moved to their respective temporary quarters, and nothing remained of either the interior or roof, the walls remained functional, standing firm against bureaucratic machinations. It was fitting, then, to sit with Dan Peterman in the shade of the gardens that spread along the Building’s north wall, and talk about the Building’s past and future, as he awaits the final construction permits.

DAN S. WANG: Well, let me first outline some of the issues I'd like to hear you talk about. Apart from the bureaucratic hassles of getting the permits, the most timely issue is your deliberate effort to institutionalize the Building. What we used to call "61st Street" or "the Building" is being reborn as the Experimental Station. This move to institutionalize (through legal self-definition, formality of governance, etc.) seems to be an important strategic move. It brings up all sorts of questions, however—what institutionalization means, what it offers, and what it might cost.

A second question has to do with how you see the Building and your own work fitting into the art world. I mean, when compared to other spheres of social activity (e.g., business, entertainment, academia) the world of contemporary art presents itself as a sphere of exceptionally wide-ranging possibility, and it is. But at the same time it can be extremely elitist.

And, finally, I am curious about how you see both the most recent and the future incarnation of the Building fitting in with its own history—the Building as a site for environmental initiatives, social experiments from the Sixties and Seventies. What lessons have been learned, and what traditions you'd like to see be continued—those kinds of ideas. Hopefully we can touch on all of these issues in one way or another over the next hour.

DAN PETERMAN: I think you could reformulate the ideas you've just mentioned into a nice article about what's been going on here. All of the issues mentioned are relevant. And basically, to over-summarize, the one was about the institutional forms, the other question about managing it in relation to the art world, and then the question of managing the hippie complex....

WANG: Right, right.

PETERMAN: These are all things that I've thought a lot about, things that percolated through my brain as I got more and more involved in this site. And they all remain open and evolving.

WANG: People seldom seem committed to staying in a particular situation over time. The modern-day economy demands that they move around a lot, and even people who have both the ecological consciousness and the luxury of staying put often don't. Most of my adult life has been like that. People go to a farm and apprentice for two or three seasons, and then leave to do something else. Maybe you've seen some issues or problems emerge because you've been in one place for a number of years now.

PETERMAN: I can't say that I brought all my ideas and strategies to this situation, and then simply fleshed them out here. It was a very open and

exploratory process, and that takes time. A lot of obvious things about the Building appealed to me when I first got involved in it. While I was a student at the University of Chicago, the building was still operating as a recycling center and was known as a cheap place to browse for almost anything. I immediately took a liking to it and over time came to better understand how it had come into existence. It was a chaotic but materially rich setting, partly because of the years of recycling related activities and a great reluctance to throw things away, and partly due to many small scale alternative ventures. Most of the ventures, including book and clothing exchanges, a bakery, gardens, and a bikeshop had run out of energy. Their physical remains were still more or less there, and embedded with a rich social history.

It was a window into a period of time that had faded away most everywhere except in Christiania, outside of Copenhagen, and that really attracted me to it.<sup>1</sup> The activities associated with the Building definitely were rooted in Sixties counterculture, and the environmental aspect was part of it, but there were other dimensions as well. Many of the people who organized those activities were still around and available when I got here, and became my friends and colleagues. So being here allowed me to unpack a period of time that was really interesting to me, and to explore social structures along with environmental and artistic strategies.

There is room for thinking about how you can act in a culture and not have to just accept the way things are. Ken Dunn and the other Resource Center people were saying there are some really neat and different ideas out there—what if we tried to put them into action? There was something instinctively activist about this situation that drew me here. It was clearly a shoe-string operation. When I came to the Resource Center they were operating probably the largest fleet of beat-up old VW buses anywhere outside of the Third World. And yet they were engaged in a highly reasoned practice of recycling, with a very simple ecological mission, but one that took into account the social complexity across both the University of Chicago and the intensively disinvested neighborhood of Woodlawn, in addition to environmental activism. For example, the Resource Center provided a model of employment for people who had fallen through all other safety nets.

WANG: Well, that's interesting because I think the period just following the blossoming of social experiments in the Sixties has been underexamined in this respect—it seems as if that flowering was followed by a period of compartmentalization of issues, or of a professionalization of activism. Throughout the Seventies it seems there was a great re-ordering and subdividing of the many progressive impulses and movements that blew wide open just a few years earlier. What you're saying is that you thought it was somehow important to go back to those original moments when people



didn't make distinctions about what is an "environmental" issue versus a "social" issue. It was all just kind of a general experiment with something different.

PETERMAN: Yes. I felt an attraction to a counterculture which brought all kinds of things together, from rigorous academic directions to "feel-good," "do-it-in-your-garden" sentiments. There was a whole range of approaches that somehow coexisted. There also were dynamics that were a bit camouflaged but very problematic in the sense of being hard to change or resist. It was hard to assert order within that kind of formlessness, to do anything except let it be, let everybody get along—just like in all the clichés. There was a kind of friction between individualistic tendencies and collective ones.

WANG: Well, we can now see that certain hippie clichés were embedded with their own forms of authority, too.

PETERMAN: Right. Many of those clichés or truisms or values also at a certain point lead to the demise of structures that require deeper levels of commitment. But at the same time, you don't want to trash them and leap into the known models of authority and structure just to get something done. I've been trying to stay mindful of wildly utopian projects—to look for ways to move into those projects without abandoning yourself to blind optimism, and still not walk away from it as an impossible task. I'm interested in finding ways to float propositions that can be very utopian. Beginning with simple exchanges of things. The bike shop is a good example of trying to build a small economy. The shop provides tools, resources, positive social contacts between adults and young people, a safe place, and job training for kids who are sorely lacking constructive things to do—and it's fueled by old bikes donated from apartment building basements. So that kind of basic economy can become a really complex sort of thing—it is wildly utopian in terms of it gathering all the loose ends of society and then getting the most you possibly can out of it all.

WANG: Yeah, you could say that's really utopian, but the term begins to lose meaning once you get into the practical details. Because what you're describing comes down to constantly reevaluating what's going on, which is really difficult and demanding. It's something most people can't do.

PETERMAN: You always have slippage and you always have leakage. And so you do have to stay on top of things, but that process becomes the goal, rather than achieving a perfect state where everything holds together perpetually. You continually make minute decisions that either shift towards

helping to stabilize the situation in one way or another, or destabilize and diffuse it. Obviously, right now with the bike shop in their second season working out of truck trailers as a result of the fire, there are an overwhelming number of forces that are diffusing the situation. The kids don't participate in the same way, and the staffers have different obligations. Security is a different issue. Everything is up in the air, and we're just kind of hanging on. But we have a lot of experience and ideas about how getting back into the shop will give us the opportunity to really make some big steps forward, and to make it really exciting again. But it is the process that leads it, and that's the most fascinating thing for the people who are centrally involved.

WANG: All groups or enterprises go through transitional periods. This seems like a particularly interesting case precisely because each of the participant cells' primary activity is so different. During this time of being upset out of their customary spaces, they've each had to find their own ways to continue what they do. Each one of them seems to be exposing new sets of needs, or clarifying what it is that they need to have in order to operate with stability.

PETERMAN: And at the same time everybody recognizes that we're in provisional circumstances. We want to get back in here, we want to have the complexity of operation that the Building formerly had. Nobody is getting set up to work this way indefinitely. Many of the participating groups had opportunities to integrate somewhere else, or to say this thing has blown up and gone away. In fact, certain well-meaning people in high positions offered that as a way to help us get through the fire—to incorporate us elsewhere separately. Of course, that means the Building, the site, the history all go away. And that's something to which, without exception, we've all resisted. We'd much rather be camped out in a trailer waiting for the day we reformulate. I think I speak for everybody because we all have that awareness. Nobody is attracted to the idea of getting the real estate section of the newspaper and shopping for studio space or office space. Because we all know that routine. The Baffler did that for years, trying to find a place for their publishing operation, and they never found it.

WANG: How much were these kinds of things talked about?

PETERMAN: After the fire?

WANG: Even before the fire. I got the story once from (publisher) Greg Lane about how The Baffler ended up here, and it sounded like more or less an accidental thing.



Renowned VW mechanic and three-decade tenant of the Building; Wong Lee in the doorway of the truck trailer that housed his business after the fire.

PETERMAN: It was a word of mouth accident within the neighborhood—somebody heard about something and followed up on it. Most of the activities here have come about similarly.

WANG: So was there a point at which people started to understand that there was something really interesting going on here that they didn't expect? Or a realization that the act of locating their activity here was beginning to affect everybody else's work?

PETERMAN: Yeah, I think the realization happened pretty quickly, without there being a single moment when it happened for everybody. There were many gradual events. Bike shop events that people would wander over for. And as you know we cooked a lot of food and had a lot of meals. It was for most people a better way of getting fed at the end of the day than having to go home, run to the store, and cook for themselves. Here was a situation that was not forced, it wasn't a club—there was nothing demanding that it happen. But why not? If somebody cooked a big batch of pasta, another person runs for beer, someone else gets a grill going—we sort of fell into a routine like that. And it wasn't only for tenants. There were more and more people with different relations to the Building, like the gardeners and Mr. Wong's customers. Then of course there were the bike shop cookouts, road rallies, and art events, and so forth, which also brought people in.

WANG: So even if there was no one identifiable moment, you could definitely say at this point—through different writings, through interviews and discussions like this one—from a number of different angles it has been confirmed that something was going on here that was different and notable.<sup>2</sup>

PETERMAN: Yes. It hit a critical mass, there's no doubt.

WANG: So that brings up the question: how are you going to manage that recognition? There's now another layer, another risk, yet another possibility of this project becoming what everybody would expect it to be, to fit it into a known category.

PETERMAN: It is interesting and complicated. Because clearly, not only do the participants have to guard against those tendencies within themselves, but the City is pushing everything through a filtering process in a way I never would have anticipated. Right now huge tracts of the city are being scrutinized for everything. The City seems to have license right now to say this doesn't belong or that does belong. In a very unsophisticated, unimaginative way, city bureaucrats are making decisions about what will be allowed to

exist or survive.

WANG: Are you talking about...

PETERMAN: I'm talking about the lakefront, for example. They're encasing it in concrete. And the Promontory Point controversy.<sup>3</sup> I'm talking about the way we were handled through the negotiations to provide land for the school expansion. I'm talking about the difficulty of that process, and then compounded by a factor of ten, the difficulties following the fire. It was clear that the mindset and entire attitude was "here's the chance, this thing doesn't belong, make it go." I'm talking about the eviction of the Creative Reuse Warehouse (another offshoot of the Resource Center) by continued University of Illinois-Chicago expansion. On a bigger scale, look at what's happening to public housing in the city.<sup>4</sup> There are powerful mechanisms in place, deeply entrenched. Although at times it's a matter of a specific agenda, I think it's generally an impersonal institutional filtering process through which everything gets pushed. Some things survive because there is already a preexisting category for them. The things that don't filter through cleanly end up in building court or the zoning office, in legal controversy of one kind or another, stressed by legal costs, stressed by any kind of interaction with the City. These sorts of costs—of dealing with City bureaucrats "just doing their jobs"—are never taken into account.

WANG: Over the past couple of decades there have been efforts to create different paths for property ownership, definition, and control. Like urban community land trusts. By now they are a well-defined way of removing land from the speculative market. A lot of those forces that you're talking about are geared towards optimizing that speculative market. [A land trust is a non-profit body which acquires land through purchase and/or donation for the purposes of protecting sites of historic, natural, or local value from development.]

PETERMAN: I studied land trusts for a while, and there was a period during which I was very interested in that model. I brought that information with me when I came to the Building. Part of my questioning of the site and of acquiring it from the Resource Center, was figuring out to what extent it needed to be reinvented, and what model of ownership would allow for it to grow in an exploratory way. To a great extent, my own commitment to the Building has been secured by the value of the property itself. It would have been difficult for me to do what I've been doing either as an underpaid employee of a non-profit or just as a volunteer. I'm not sure a land trust strategy would have worked that well—certainly not while juggling a career, and kids, and



family. I've taken a considerable financial risk, but because I control the property itself there is at least some compensation for the huge amounts of time and energy I've invested. If it all goes to pot there's at least a settlement to be had—something to carry into future projects.

WANG: I can see the land trust model tracking the project in an expected direction, to have it “serve the public” in a lowest common denominator kind of way. So owning the property has allowed you to leverage it, to do something much more risky. You've kept it in the speculative market to have some consolation security if the experiments should fail. Of course, that means that developers will keep it in their sights, as well.

PETERMAN: In this city I now believe that everything remains “in the sights”. I no longer have confidence in an urban land trust model as a magic solution here. But keeping it as private property in a speculative market has allowed me to leverage my own time and my own activity in a way I just couldn't rationally do otherwise. It would be insane, or suicidal in a way that would affect my family. But, yeah, leverage is the right word. Owning it has allowed me to leverage it more dramatically into what I want it to become, which ultimately is a more open, productive project.

As we institutionalize the Building, in order to survive the bureaucratic filtering process, we're trying to keep that balance in mind. Essentially, I'm trying to define things here as an incubator model. We want to create a not-for-profit called the Experimental Station that will take over full operation of the site. Ownership will become a more distant issue for extended periods, revisited every five or ten years. The private ownership model will be in place, but the full operation of the site is given over to the not-for-profit. That balance is going to hopefully allow the Experimental Station sufficient stability and free play.

WANG: And you're aware that it may turn into something that doesn't fit with the possibilities you imagined.

PETERMAN: That's true. Initially, we'd like for it to be as open as possible. As an incubator, it's going to be an engine for taking interesting ideas and interesting projects whether they're arts based, or entrepreneurial, or whatever, and try to create an interesting local ecology within the building, within this chunk of land. The idea is to foster those little projects and figure out how to achieve the critical mass that we were talking about before—a threshold at which diverse projects begin to reinforce each other in unexpected ways and new ideas get embraced. So hopefully the Experimental Station becomes a structure that reinvents itself by continually bringing in new ideas.

That's always going to influence the structuring principle. The Experimental Station will at that point have a board, and some ongoing debate about how authority is managed... but hopefully it's an open and adaptable thing.

WANG: Inevitably the Experimental Station itself, once institutionalized in that way, can become its own filtering mechanism.

PETERMAN: Right. But it can be a filter to help identify and sustain certain kinds of initiatives—as opposed to a filter that serves to weed out and eliminate things.

WANG: I can imagine that once there's some level of formality to the enterprise, others from outside of it will start to recognize it as a potential resource in ways that the Building was not. It took a discerning eye to recognize the Building as a resource: You had to see beyond the normal stuff, to see it as a righteous experiment without any external entity conferring legitimacy. It seemed to exist as a place for cultural work largely unregulated by established worlds, and belonged mostly to a social world of its own making. It will have a higher profile in the future.

PETERMAN: Trying to create the institution that will stay open in one direction but also provide an identity and a name, a legal structure, and hopefully some kind of an economic balance—to be sure, it's a defensive posture. But it needs to hold its ground, or we don't have a point to fight from. Just the idea of giving it a name, to me, is disappointing. The Building's been called “the wood shop,” “the bike shop,” “the gardens”... by the City, by the University, by all different people. It was like the story of the blind men and the elephant—whatever part of the elephant they grabbed, that's what they would call it. There's something really lovely about that. To let it define itself from multiple starting points. Unfortunately, that's an impossible luxury right now. When you're sitting in zoning court, in front of a judge, that's not the time to become the Zen master who says it is what you believe it is. As much fun as that would be, they would say, “It's ours, that's what we want it to be!”

The Building was a place where things happened, but weren't forced to. Now we are being forced. We cashed in all kinds of built-up credit to save this place. We were, for the most part, flying under the radar before the fire, but after the fire we had to openly declare ourselves, and use all of the connections we have, all the strength of our reputations. Each one of us—my reputation as an international artist, The Baffler's reputation, the bike shop's reputation. We can't just put those things away now. It's a question of disappearance, of being on the map or not. Retreating into our apartments and garages, giving up the space, giving up the direct connections of history and

memory that go back in time to the Sixties and early Seventies—giving up the whole opportunity for people to wander in and say “what is this place?” Nobody wanted to let that happen. I consider the social history of the site a valuable resource worth preserving.

WANG: Institutionalization can be an effective way to protect our gains. But it also opens the door to bureaucratization. That’s the downside of institutionalization. In the worst cases—which aren’t uncommon—groups of people formerly responsible to each other become irresponsible, and allow one, some, or all to be treated in disrespectful or even degrading ways, all in the name of the institution. This happens even when the individuals involved before and after the moment of institutionalization are the same. So one question is, then, how to establish ongoing enterprises with the lifespans and reproductive capabilities of institutions, but without all the bureaucratization? Because there’s a degree of open-endedness built right into the name, would it be accurate to say that you imagine the Experimental Station to be an experiment in institutionalization itself?

PETERMAN: I borrowed the name “Experimental Station,” going back a hundred years, from a reference Frank Lloyd Wright made in a different setting, and I think it suggests a very clear, anchored, Midwestern identity, but also doesn’t exactly spell out what we’re doing. It gives an easy and usable explanation, and it sounds productive, like a concept that’s been developed. But in the end, hopefully, it’s kind of hard to peg down beyond an incubator model. Of course, the question is incubating what? And at that point we’re striving to keep things as open as possible.

Along with questions about land trusts and ownership models is the possibility of a microfoundation, and things are moving in that direction, too. We’ve had several discussions about this kind of model. Rather than the enormous gulf that currently exists between foundations and the projects they fund, why not operate within a stable community of some kind, and have the ability to disburse funds much more directly and much more efficiently. I think the main case for it is one of efficiency. The idea for this comes out of operating the Building for years and being able to adjust rents quickly. For example, if the wood shop came to me and said we’re really having a cash flow crisis, we could say, okay why don’t we just put off the rent for a couple of months and see where you are then. The Baffler continually raised their own rent whenever they had a little bit more money because they realized that they’d been paying a significantly under-market rate. So they voluntarily contributed a little bit more. Those kinds of adjustments happened because everyone had some faith in the way that the building was run—there was no profit siphon and it was all going back into the mechanism.

I began to think about that more and more as an extremely efficient foundation. Based on a single conversation you could make a decision that could impact a small start-up operation pretty significantly. The incubator model, as I've been thinking it through, takes that kind of thing into account, so that it becomes a kind of assisting fiscal agent that can adjust rents, can fundraise for tenants, and can be an active mechanism for cultivating things with a minimum of hassle.

WANG: So this would be an example of cutting down on the bureaucracy that tends to impersonalize the workings of most institutions. It's at once both a more advanced and more literal application of the concept "trust."

PETERMAN: Right. The microfoundation would only work with a personal element, with people knowing each other. Rather than sitting back and issuing occasional grants to people who go through a standard procedure, it's being in much more direct contact, and seeing that, for example, some project clearly needs a new computer—we could simply say here's the money for a computer. The idea is to be in a position to know as quickly as possible that it's time to get something done, to bring it to the next step.

WANG: Well, when you're thinking about the importance of shaping the structure on all of these levels—the social structure, the economic relationships between all of the entities, things like that—what about the space itself? I haven't seen the floor plan for the actual rehab, but what kinds of discussions did you have with the architect when you were thinking about the new walls, and divisions of physical space inside?



Creative use of office chair: The Baffler's temporary office trailer that they have been using since 2001, after a break in.

PETERMAN: We had a lot of good discussions about it. We brought all the tenants in.

WANG: Because the pre-fire building layout was so odd and so irregularly cut-up.

PETERMAN: We're basically looking for maximum flexibility, and there's always been an interest in setting up private space and figuring out how that relates to common space. Privacy is an important component, so there is always the option of participating in a common event, or just going into a niche and staying there. That's been one of the continuing interests—to have well-divided space, but then to really balance common areas. Nearly everyone was involved in the gardens. The bike shop has got a lot of design needs. The Baffler space will be a more conventional kind of office space. And then the kitchen, as I mentioned, has been and will be important. We're designing a big multipurpose space, and a small gallery-like space, truck access, video screening, et cetera—we're trying to get as much versatility as we can into the plans.

WANG: It seemed to me that the pre-fire layout not only facilitated mixing, but even forced it, with the way people had to walk through certain areas in order to get to, say, the bathroom. And there really wasn't a proper front door, so a first time visitor would often end up circling the entire building and looking at it from all sides before knocking on one of the heavy steel doors to get in. Sometimes that could be a small adventure in itself. Were there moments when you were going over a plan or a sketch and just said, wait a minute, this is just far too conventional, or too compartmentalized, or this plan won't facilitate the kind of mixing that we want?

PETERMAN: Yes. We rejected a lot of ideas. And now the plans are vastly simplified. Mainly because of the time we lost dealing with an uncooperative building department, we just need to get a roof on it. So a whole range of interesting possibilities—rooftop gardens with greenhouses, eco-design, self-sustaining energy projects—will have to wait. Those kinds of things we discussed a lot early on, and we've tried to incorporate the possibility of adding them later. That's about the best we can do right now. We just can't afford more delays trying to explain to the City what a deep-well system is.

WANG: Well, that leaves open a lot of architectural possibilities for the future.

PETERMAN: It does. It'll be a very open structure. I can show you plans



sometime.

WANG: Yeah, I'm curious.

PETERMAN: The whole building will be a little bit more streamlined for events. People will arrive at a very regular door, and have access to bathrooms. So it won't be what it was. It can never be as funky as it was, but we just have to get in and see what it turns into.

WANG: Are you yourself looking forward to the involvement of fresh people?

PETERMAN: Yeah. I'm really excited by the Building and what can happen. If the model comes together, even if it's a different one from before then it could really be a good project. It's exciting to have the opportunity to do this. It's really frustrating that it's been so antagonized by City agencies. I would have never anticipated it being...

WANG: That bad?

PETERMAN: Yeah. I mean, after having lived here a long time and not being particularly naïve about it, I didn't know it could be that bad.

WANG: Could we talk a little bit more about how you see the environmental movement, and the ways in which both the Building and your own art activity fit into that sphere? I see in this activity, as a totality, a really interesting critique of what I would call the mainstream or conventional environmental movement. Part of it has to do with the location of the Building itself—in North America you don't find too many environmental initiatives on the edge of inner-city African American neighborhoods.

PETERMAN: It is a little bit difficult for me to articulate, partly because it's just hard for me to summarize how it's perceived from the outside. Obviously, for years I've been working in close relation to committed environmentalists, and working in close proximity to operations like the Resource Center, which has always treated environmental and socioeconomic problems as a single thing. I've had the opportunity to constantly make distinctions between what a good environmental activist would do versus what a committed artist would do, or what an artist-activist would do, or what a kind of sociologically committed political activist would do—to carefully consider all of these versions of actors. Of course it's hard to just nail it down, to say this is what we're doing and what it means to either the



Two architectural design proposals for the Experimental Station.

environmental movement or the art world. In a lot of ways I think it does come back to what you started out talking about, which is returning to a specific place, spending time there, and letting things emerge from there. A kind of critique emerges—one that critically examines the mechanisms that move very quickly through problems that aren't solved by moving quickly through them. Short term expediency or least-resistance pathways are not always the same as the most efficient or productive ones. Or to put it another way, you could collect a lot of information on sustainable living, but if you live sustainably for fifty years, then you've done something entirely different and entirely better.

This project has certainly been influenced by what you might call elements of an ecological consciousness, the appreciation of complexity being one of them. But there are other equally important elements. For example, you might be attracted to something aesthetically, through artistic training and an awareness of pattern, texture, form, etcetera, and those qualities of that thing may move into politics or social relations or some similarly broadened arena of social concern. It's hard to define how this hybrid activity is or should be seen—aesthetic, biological, political—and I'm not particularly interested in making those distinctions. There definitely is a kind of simple biological model that concerns me—one that understands that you need complexity, and you need to pay attention to details, that certain things result just from improving soil quality, for example. The same thing is true within an operation like the bike shop. By putting more tools out, you make for a richer situation. Getting more bikes, getting people with different sets of skills, you create a richer setting for things to start happening. I guess in managing the Building I've intuitively avoided repetition, and instead tried to foster each different little area. So that's something I can either take in an aesthetic dimension or as an environmental principle: By bringing diversity and complexity to a site, you're using it more fully. It becomes more stable as a point of social interaction, and it becomes more attractive.

WANG: To me it seems like a failure more egregious on the part of the environmental movement than even other kinds of sociopolitical movements because, as you're saying, simple biological evidence points toward those conditions of diversity and complexity as fundamentally positive values. The modern environmental movement is supposedly informed by that kind of a consciousness, but then you see this monolithic process, whether you're talking about the organizational structure of environmental groups or the focus of environmental issue-oriented campaigns. And maybe you're not addressing your work to the environmental movement or to environmentalists, but it definitely seems like people who are interested in more effective environmental action could certainly take some lessons.

PETERMAN: There are a lot of forces that narrow people down, and narrow agendas down, so that you can put out mailings, so that you can fundraise effectively, and so on. Obviously, there are realities that lead down that path. Part of the sentiment of this place was to allow ourselves to step back and find something that could sustain it—not to become overly dependent on external funding, and therefore not to have to over-specialize, to over-define, to even name what it is that was going on here. To just let it become “61st Street” or “The Building” or another generic name.

WANG: Well, my own experience is the reason I ask this question. I had an early fascination with these kinds of ecological processes, and they really informed the values that I’ve taken into adulthood. For a while I thought that I might find some satisfaction by becoming involved in environmental groups or becoming an environmental activist. Then I was disappointed to see that to become an environmental activist almost means giving up being a part of that complexity, even with regard to other issues and causes. That led me back to art. The art world seems to be one of the few spheres of action that allows for an exploration of ideas, histories, and issues in the kinds of depth that reveals relationships between all different things.

PETERMAN: Right. Well, see those little potted ash trees over there, sitting near the fence? Those are the results of ComEd’s—I don’t know what you’d call it—maybe “blood money.” They got slapped on the wrist for x tens of millions of dollars, which they negotiated to repay by doing so-called environmental projects. So passing out generic city shade trees is their deal. They passed all these out and it just so happened at the end of the day there were seventy-five extra trees. Ken Dunn ended up getting them all because he’s the recycler who saves everything, and the ComEd people didn’t have any interest in the leftovers. They just distributed as many as they could and went home at four o’clock and Ken dropped the rest off here. So we’ve got seventy-five trees here. There’s an obvious critique that you could aim at ComEd, or whoever’s negotiating these kinds of deals. But you can also take a step back into the art world and say, well, okay, these trees now have that much richer a history—they’ve gone through not only their own biological programming, but a whole other kind of economic structure, and they’ve emerged, they’re still living, they’re still in pots, there’s another casual process of them getting planted in the vicinity. They’re being leaked away one at a time in a car trunk here and a car trunk there. I take great satisfaction in the underlying absurdity of it all. Not that it’s crystallized in anything beyond the fact that there those trees are, and I water them every other day. But to have committed myself to the course of action that tries to get ComEd to perform some ridiculous act of retribution like this, and to say that’s what

being an environmentalist is—that's not going to work for me.

Or you look at a place like the Center for Green Technology [the City of Chicago showcase for environmentally responsible practice], and in some ways there are aspects of this Building there, like trying to look at a site ecologically, and trying to invite interesting tenants like the Greencorps, and a solar panels producer. There's the effort to make an interesting community of things, but they're doing it mainly through settlement funding from ComEd. Millions of dollars, funded over the top, everybody's paid, there are more public relations people than there are engineers involved in it. You end up leaving saying it's interesting, but it's just not real.

WANG: You're more ready to identify as an artist than as an environmental activist, and part of that seems to do with your recognition of the importance of representation and symbolism. The Center for Green Technology may be doing some good stuff, but it doesn't have that awareness of itself as a symbol. Because considered as a symbol, it would seem to be a failure, a pay-off.

PETERMAN: Also, I think if you're invested in that kind of community, you end up becoming very cynical. But if you dive into the absurdities and you bring a rich vocabulary of materials, placements, juxtapositions, and textures, then somehow the task changes. I guess environmental activism doesn't really need artists. There are elements of professionalized activism that are useful at times, but it's kind of a bulldog occupation where one has to be focused and go at the same things everyday, one has to be fighting slow or unchanging bureaucracies everyday. In order to process what it all means I feel like I've got to step back into the art world, and there I can let the fuller meaning unfold.

WANG: We were talking about using the structure of private property to leverage or make possible these other kinds of activities. Do you see some parallel between that and the whole construct of selling and collecting in the art world? Because if you're talking about becoming a cynic, there certainly are enough pathways that lead to cynicism in the art world, including selling your work in the art object market. Even though the art can be anything and anything can be the art, there still are questions about who can experience the art, both in terms of making it and encountering it. It seems important to think through those and other kinds of art world dysfunctions, since supporters of the Building have been using the art world as a constructive context for some of the radically democratic things that have happened here, and yet large segments of the art world are anything but.

PETERMAN: Yes, of course the art world has abundant political flaws and



pitfalls, but it also draws people and projects and resources together in ways that just don't exist elsewhere. I benefit to some extent by private collectors, but not to a huge degree. I also benefit from institutions that give jobs to people who are interested in working with me on projects and a lot of things don't have a salable outcome. It can be very dangerous to think of the art world as a place to seek sanctuary, but that world can provide an arena that's willing to flex and stretch, to accommodate new things and different kinds of ideas. And it is an arena that can adjust to different formulations of political, social, historical, or aesthetic interests. I've always found a satisfying range of motivations at work, and a satisfying range of possibilities. I think the art world really has to be approached as a kind of laboratory.

WANG: I suppose it's another case of having to constantly evaluate the different forces at work. And if you bring your values to the art world, rather than looking to the art world for your values, cynicism isn't as much of a danger. Can we end by hearing a few personal thoughts about how the fire has pushed your thinking and your artwork in unexpected directions? I know that you've exhibited some of the insurance claim photos, for example. Are there any really tough decisions you've had to make about your work given the loss of your workspace? Or any surprisingly positive developments? I can certainly say for myself that even though you and I already had been talking on and off for several years about what kinds of projects I could help bring to the building, it was the fire that opened the door wide—so people like me could just show up and say “I'm here to help, what can I do?” I can imagine that for every relationship strained by the fire, there might have been four or five that became much stronger.

PETERMAN: There's no question that some of the relationships in place prior to the fire have deepened because of it, and in surprising ways new ones have emerged. There are many people who were not directly involved but are deeply committed to what this model of activity has to offer—people from very different backgrounds.

The fire combined with the inhospitable stance taken by the City has forced me to adjust priorities. In some ways it has speeded me along in directions I was already traveling. It helped focus and intensify many of the issues I was rubbing up against. My sense of how productive something like the Experimental Station could be has been boosted by a greater sense of urgency in restoring and maintaining it. Along with this comes a much stronger awareness of the external forces, some deliberate and ideologically driven, and others stumbling and bureaucratic, which work against it.

On a more personal level, the fire and all that's followed, has had an enormous impact on me as an artist. I've had to scramble and improvise in

so many different ways. Some kinds of projects can move ahead given my current circumstance while others can't budge until I have a studio again. I'm fortunate to have established myself as an artist with several different strategies for working so I've continued to be somewhat productive. Some things, like the photos you mentioned, have been satisfying extensions of earlier interests. The dialogue about the fire insinuates itself into any discussion about what I do as an artist. It becomes another layer of content. But the story isn't finished yet. It'll take more time for me to really be able to answer that question.



Canning tomatoes grown in the garden.

## POSTSCRIPT

In the late spring of 2003 the City of Chicago finally approved the long-sought building permits. The new foundation was laid in early July of that year and Peterman expects some of the original tenants, including The Baffler and Wong Lee's auto repair, to move out of their trailers and back into the Experimental Station by the fall of 2004. At the same time, the Experimental Station as an organizing and funding entity will begin to take shape.

## NOTES

Special thanks to “Diamonds” Dave Mulcahey for his editorial assistance.

<sup>1</sup> Christiania was a disused parcel of land that was overtaken in 1970 by Danish activists and countercultural types. It has evolved into something of an autonomous territory of its own, and today continues the experiments in governance and lifestyle started more than thirty years ago.

<sup>2</sup> See bibliography, especially Thompson and Sholette, Gregory G., "Dangerous Liaisons: Dan Peterman's Universal Lab and the University of Chicago ," in the catalog Dan Peterman: 7 Deadly Sins And Other Stories, pp.70-75.

<sup>3</sup> Promontory Point is a lakefront park in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago designed by Prairie School architect Alfred Caldwell. In 2001, the Chicago Park District and the Army Corps of Engineers unveiled plans to destroy the historically significant limestone revetment at 55th Street and replace it with with a concrete and steel structure. The people of the nearby South Side neighborhoods vehemently opposed the project, and a community group has organized to secure the Point's preservation.

<sup>4</sup> In 1999 the Chicago Housing Authority initiated a program to revamp the city's public housing on an epic scale. The plan calls for the demolition of more than 50 high-rise buildings, clearing the way for private development. Because the tens of thousands of former residents lacked any effective advocacy, they face an uncertain future caught between forced relocation and inadequate replacement low-income housing.

More on the Experimental Station and the art of Dan Peterman:

[www.thebaffler.org](http://www.thebaffler.org)

[www.blackstonebike.com](http://www.blackstonebike.com)

[www.resourcecenterchicago.org](http://www.resourcecenterchicago.org)

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August 2004: The Experimental Station's interior under construction.